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Decriminalizing Meisner's Criminal Action Exercise

by James Paul Stover, Haley Anissa Alvarez, and Sarah Nesselroade Hopson

Most practitioners and teachers of performance consider Sanford Meisner and the Meisner Technique to be one of the 20th century's most influential additions to the study of acting. For many years, William Esper was deemed the foremost authority on this technique, having been the associate director of Meisner's Neighborhood Playhouse prior to founding the Meisner-based acting program at Rutgers University.[1] One specific exercise from the technique, the Criminal Action Problem (and sometimes referred to as the Criminal Action Exercise) was included in Esper's 2008 book *The Actors' Art and Craft*, which examines the application of Meisner's teachings. The exercise has been used in actor training programs at several universities throughout the United States and was included in Bowling Green State University's Spring 2024 graduate level theatre course, Theatre Performance Theory & Practice. This version of the course was centered on the pedagogy of acting and was taught by James Paul Stover. Haley Anissa Alvarez and Sarah Nesselroade Hopson were two of the nine students in the course, which included Master's and Ph.D. students. Uta Hagen exercises, the teachings of William Roudebush, John Barton and Justin Emeka's views on Shakespeare and other topics were

[1] To learn more of Meisner's background, read Mike Barnes' article highlighted in the bibliography.

explored throughout the semester. The Criminal Action Problem created one of the most involved examinations, brought forth conversations that changed the instructor's view of the exercise and enlightened the mostly predominately white populated group of students.

THE BEGINNING:

As a graduate student in the MFA Theatre Performance Pedagogy program at Virginia Commonwealth University, Stover was introduced to the Criminal Action Problem chapter from Esper's book by theatre faculty member Susan Schuld.[2] Schuld was a student of William Esper's in the MFA Acting program at Rutgers University and brought the exercise to the attention of Stover and three other members of his graduate cohort who had been tasked with re-imagining the Department of Theatre's introductory acting classes. Stover included the exercise while teaching as a Virginia Commonwealth University graduate student and continued to incorporate it in introductory level acting classes at three additional institutions. Esper describes the Criminal Action Problem exercises as "quintessentially Meisner Technique in that they draw purely and exclusively from the reality of doing."[3] The set up for the chapter has Esper introducing a class to the exercise and then, following the group's first foray into the exercise, explaining that it is meant to "acquaint the actor with heightened circumstances" asserting that "people are most alive when they're in the greatest danger."[4]

While there has been a great deal of scholarship related to the Meisner technique, very little has discussed this particular exercise or how the approaches of Meisner overall could have

[2] To learn more of Schuld's work, visit https://www.susanschuldvoice.com.
[3] William Esper and Damon DiMarco, *The Actor's Art and Craft*, (Anchor Books Original, 2008), p.143.
[4] Esper and DiMarco, p.153.

negative psychological effects on the students and practitioners who engage with it. Furthermore, there has been little to no scholarship on the technique's relationship to racial equality among actors and whether it could lead to 'othering' minority groups. In an era where the approaches of Stanislavski and Strasberg have been vehemently challenged for creating unsafe spaces for developing minds and performers of color, there is a clear lack of examination of Meisner in relation to other major acting methods developed during the last century.

Dr. M. Subbiah does discuss these issues in his recent article for ISAR Journal for the Arts, "Meisner Technique's Impact on Actor Training: Evolution, Challenges, and Future Directions." Subbiah states, "The emphasis on intense emotional engagement and the specific exercises involved might pose challenges for individuals with certain mental health conditions or personal backgrounds."[5] In discussing cultural diversity, he asserts "there are discussions about the cultural relevance and inclusivity of the Meisner technique, particularly in a global context. Critics argue that the technique's origins and historical development in a specific cultural milieu may not fully address the diverse needs and perspectives of actors from various cultural backgrounds."[6] In a later section of the article, he points out also that "modern adaptations of the Meisner technique often incorporate elements focused on emotional wellness and self-care. This may include mindfulness practices, counseling support, and a more intentional approach to navigating the emotional demands of the training Process."[7] He fails however to site specific instances with his more general approach.

[5] M. Subbiah, "The Meisner Technique Impact on Actor Training," *ISAR Journal of the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences,* p. 44.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid, p. 45.

A 2024 *Backstage* article that appears to be promoting Meisner does state that "attempting to provoke a response from an unresponsive scene partner can lead some actors to make dangerous choices" but does not go further into any possible harm that can be caused by approaching acting work with this method.[8] Other recent scholarship includes Royce Sparks book, *Meisner and Mindfulness,* While the text offers useful tools to help the mental health of individuals *using* the technique, it does little to discuss the potential damage brought on by exploring the foundational work of the technique *itself*.[9]

Highlighting these however minor moments of addressing the issues is important, given the context of how the Meisner Technique is viewed by teachers and coaches. One studio in New York states that the practice will "unleash the power of raw, genuine emotion" and that Meisner is "a gateway to breathtaking authenticity on stage and screen."[10]

In Stover's experience teaching Criminal Action, he would introduce it to students following the exploration of a series of Uta Hagen exercises. In her book, *A Challenge for the Actor*, Hagen proclaims that the professional actor must "concern themselves with an understanding of the self, the development of sensory responses—both physiological and emotional—and their consequent actions."[11] Stover found throughout several years of teaching the exercise, in conversation with Uta Hagen's exercises, a clear understanding of the foundational tools of the Stanislavski acting system was created (objective, environment, relationship, tactics).[12] Stover has also witnessed the outcomes discussed by Esper in his book as "very effective," including an "intense" experience where he cannot avoid what's happening on

[8] Alex Ates, "Meisner's Technique: An Actors Guide," Backstage, 2024.
[9] Royce Sparks, *Meisner's and Mindfulness,* (Routledge 2022).
[10] Charlie Sandlan, "The Meisner Technique: An In-Depth Guide to Acting," Blog, *Maggie Flanigan*, 2025.
[11] Uta Hagen, *A Challenge for the Actor* (Maxwell McMillan Canada, 1991), p. 50.
[12] Robert Barton, *Acting: Onstage and Off,* (Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1993), p. 107.

stage, focusing their entire attention "on the room he's in and the behavior of the other people in it," eliciting a high stakes scenario that requires moment-to-moment responses.[13]

The most basic version of the Criminal Action Exercise, as described in Esper's chapter and taught repeatedly by Stover, presents a scenario where Actor 1 has something of value in their living space. Actor 2, familiar with the living space (either a college dorm room, apartment or house that both are somewhat acquainted with or can easily become so) knows that this item of value exists in that space. Actor 2 needs to attain this item to solve a personal financial issue. Often the scenario given to Actor 2 involves them paying tuition, getting their car fixed, or paying back a debt. Actor 2 decides to break into Actor 1's living quarters and steal the item in order to solve their problem. The item can be a check in an envelope, a piece of jewelry or cash, but it needs to be tangible and have value. The classroom is set up to mirror the living environment (often using mats and acting blocks); the lights in the room are turned down, and Actor 1 is then put into a sleep state by asking them to use their mind's eye to review in great detail each step of a particular day in their life. Actor 2 is then tasked with breaking into the dwelling, knowing that the item is there, but not knowing where it is and trying not to wake up Actor 1 while they search for it. They also are prepped for the exercise knowing that if they don't achieve their objective, there could be serious consequences. Additionally, if they wake Actor 1 up, they could get caught, which may also lead to negative outcomes. As described in the chapter and in Stover's experience, this almost always leads to a dynamic and thoroughly engaging activity with clear learning outcomes and tremendously positive feedback from students.[14]

Before beginning the exercise, two issues from the reading are brought to the surface. The male actor (Trevor) who is to be Actor 2 for the exercise, when asked why he needs the item

[13] Esper and DiMarco, p. 143.
[14] Ibid, pp. 144-146.

of value, states “Well, it could be that I’ve been dating this underage girl and now she’s pregnant. I’ve got to get her an abortion before her parents find out what we’ve been up to; otherwise they’ll have me arrested for statutory rape. But I can’t pay for the abortion.”[15] Additionally, when the exercise is first being performed, as described in the chapter, Actor 1 (a female-identifying student named Vanessa) throws objects at Actor 2 while stating “I’ll kill you!” to ward off the intruder. Warnings about these moments were always given to Stover’s students prior to them reading the text in preparation for exploring the exercise, but other potential issues related to exploring the exercise were not as thoroughly addressed.

THE DISRUPTION:

Alvarez first explored Meisner's Criminal Action Exercise during the graduate acting class referenced above with Prof. James Stover. In preparing for the seminar that week, Alvarez recalls how anxious the readings made her feel as she anticipated Prof. Stover asking the students to embody an approach which asked her peers to “awaken their inner criminal[16] by staging a break-in scenario.[17] As a student of color who had been exposed to several acts of violence, Alvarez trembled at the possibility of having to playfully revisit her trauma in an environment where she was meant to be building trust with others. While Alvarez hesitated to bring attention to her concerns, she was motivated by previous conversations to explore the potential harm of this exercise during the first quarter of class. Though Prof. Stover might’ve planned for a quick check-in with the text during the first ten minutes of class, most of the period was spent

[15] Esper and DiMarco, p. 144.
[16] Ibid, p. 142.
[17] Ibid.

brainstorming more inclusive reinterpretations of Meisner's approach given some of the perspectives that Alvarez brought forth.

Alvarez began by mentioning how uncomfortable she felt with the idea of creating an unsafe environment for those who may have been victims of past violence. Since crimes like home invasions disproportionately affect low-income communities, theatre practitioners must take steps to ensure that every individual has the correct tools to step 'in' and 'out' of this exercise in a manner that does not alter the mental or physical well-being of the student. As a victim of these crimes herself, Alvarez worried about how she might react by having to separate a triggering experience from what was supposed to be a fun improvisational game. For weeks after her own home invasion, Alvarez slept in the bottom part of an old bunk bed and vigilantly hid several butcher knives in between the mattresses and the bed frame, ready to defend herself in the middle of the night. In the text, after Vanessa (Actor 1) is in a state of sleep, the instructor "gently closes the studio door behind him and shuts off the lights. The room goes pitch black..."[18] before Trevor (Actor 2) is sent out to commit the crime. Alvarez asked the class to consider how her lived experiences might also taint the goal of this exercise by potentially causing physical harm to the student executing the theft. After doing so, her peers suggested we reimagine the exercise by altering the circumstances of the scenario in an appropriate way for a contemporary classroom setting.

The second issue that arose for Alvarez was the unethical practice of using this exercise in the Midwest region of the United States given its long history of racial and judicial discrimination against Black people. For instance, the practice of 'stop-and-frisk' was the result

[18] Esper and DiMarco, p. 146.

of a 1968 Supreme Court case where John Terry, an African American man, was arrested in downtown Cleveland after he and two other men were suspected of theft for walking back and forth in front of a jewelry store. Referring back to Esper's text, when Trevor enters the scene, he is reminded that whatever he is attempting to steal is not limited to cash. Instead, the text mentions the possibility of the object being a family heirloom and the risk of being caught is an immediate prison sentence. The history of the Midwest thus puts an extra strain on artists who are working towards creating a healthy and inclusive workspace while juggling traditional acting practices. Additionally, location-based racism may come along while working within a PWI.

The last concern Alvarez mentioned was the fear she had around the idea of her white peers embodying problematic stereotypes when asked to portray a burglar. The text says, "the moment you do something the least bit untruthful in a Criminal Action problem, the audience sees it as clearly as if a red neon light starts flashing, 'bad acting.'"[19] What if Alvarez's classmates were influenced by popular cultural references, employing the term "yn" in order to be 'authentic' and 'awaken their inner criminal'? The meaning of "yn" originates within AAVE (African American Vernacular English) and became most popular in 2023 to describe the delinquent behavior of young Black men. One of the larger consequences of the term is that it negatively portrays African American boys as criminals with specific stereotypes around the music they listen to, the way they style their hair, their aesthetics, and their physicality. The conversation in the classroom allowed us to further explore how our unconscious biases might impact our performance choices, and students were asked to reflect on how their gestures may

[19] Esper and DiMarco, p. 143.

come off as offensive if influenced by contemporary terms taken out of historical and cultural contexts.

In light of sharing Alvarez's concerns with her classmates, they brainstormed more inclusive scenarios that still fulfilled the goals of the original exercise from the text. This time, however, they approached the artistic mission of Meisner with an awareness of identities that carry both privileges and/or oppression. In an effort to decriminalize his approach, many of them continued the conversation outside of that particular class period. What arose was a call to acknowledge the white-centered pedagogy that often infiltrates our classrooms.

Roxanne Schroeder-Arce shares a commitment to creating a culturally responsive classroom in her article, "Beyond acknowledgement of whiteness: Teaching white theatre teachers to examine their racial identity." She says, "Despite the field's efforts to engage with critical race theory and embrace multiculturalism, theatre teacher education continues to center whiteness. Without intentional conversations about...whiteness in theatre training programs, new teachers inevitably reinforce hegemony in their classrooms and on their stages."[20] As a result of having those conversations in the seminar, Stover's students were able to break down and prevent the embodiment of harmful images such as the "yn" stereotype previously mentioned.

Similarly, the scholarship of Brian Herrera highlights the pedagogical responsibility we have towards molding emerging artists via the training(s) we teach/implement. He says, "college theatre programs seem to hold the power to ratify the writers, works, and traditions of Latinx theatre [by] training emerging theatre-makers and theatregoers."[21] The universities Herrera's

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[20] Schroeder-Arce, Roxanne. "Beyond Acknowledgement of Whiteness: Teaching White Theatre Teachers to Examine their Racial Identity." *Youth Theatre Journal*, 2017.

[21] Brian Herrera, 'But do we have the Actors for that?': Some Principles of Practice for Staging Latinx Plays in a University Theatre Context, *Theatre Topics* 27, no. 1 (2017), p. 25.

statement refers to are predominantly white institutions or PWIs. The underrepresentation of marginalized students encouraged Alvarez to remain silent about the microaggressions embedded within traditional acting practices in the past. However, Stover empowered his students to use the space as Herrera suggests.

The need to create a new approach for Meisner's Criminal Action exercise is also in conversation with the work of Laura Rikard and Amanda Rose Villarreal. In their article, "Focus on Impact, not Intention: Moving from 'Safe' Spaces to Spaces of Acceptable Risk," Rikard and Villarreal highlight the impact of hegemonic structures in higher education. Villareal says, "Despite my best efforts to support and protect students within my classrooms, factors from their home lives would often permeate my creative and learning environment."[22] Here she underscores how lived experiences of marginalized students influence their ability to absorb the curriculum. Similar to what transpired in the graduate seminar, this text suggests that Alvarez's reaction comes from the circumstances/events that have shaped her upbringing and blurred her ability to accept the educational values of Meisner's Criminal Action exercise. Just as Villareal argues, sharing her experiences allowed others to take their blinders off and understand the need for a new anti-racist approach.

Ronald Pelias, a professor of Performance Studies at Southern Illinois University, urges us to consider the value of recognizing lived experiences next to the canon of literature. The methodology in Pelias's book, *An Alphabet of Performative Writing*, disrupts the common practices of academia by widening our perspectives on familiar practices. His work challenges academics to look beyond the traditional style of research to allow for more diverse

[22] Amanda Rose Villarreal, *Focus on Impact, not Intention: Moving from 'Safe' Spaces to Spaces of Acceptable Risk, The Journal of Consent-Based Performance*, 2023, p. 5.

interpretations by valuing lived experiences as scholarship. The journey in Stover's classroom parallels the work of Pelias as the backgrounds of marginalized groups influenced an understanding of Meisner's exercise. While Alvarez could not find resources that addressed the lack of inclusive practices in the textually based Criminal Action exercise, the students in the classroom weighed her experiences equally alongside the excerpt of Meisner's book. Doing so allowed them to discover what theatre practitioners were missing. The seminar went on to brainstorm scenarios for the Criminal Action exercise that didn't rely on harmful stereotypes or induce a fear-based response that could potentially be connected to a traumatic lived experience.

THE WORK TOWARDS INCLUSIVE PRACTICES:

As a response to recognizing the layered and complex issues presented in Meisner's Criminal Action Exercise, Stover, Alvarez, and Hopson began to reimagine this activity. The goal of preserving Meisner's learning objectives highlighted in the original exercise remained, but now with the added desire of making it appropriate for the contemporary classroom. Reimagining this exercise began with brainstorming how to instill clear ideas of stakes and tactics into learning actors. Increasing our awareness of the cultural stereotypes embedded in American culture was also required. As recently as 2025, other voices in the field of theatre and arts education have recognized the need for teachers to better understand the cultural complexities of student populations in performance work. Scholar Apinporn Chaiwanichsiri emphasizes that not taking the steps necessary to recognize these realities "can result in teachers and/or directors making decisions that perpetuate stereotypes and engage in cultural appropriation."[23] In response, the work of Geneva Gay, the academic behind Cultural

[23] Apinporn Chaiwanichsiri, "Culturally Responsive Teaching in Musical Theater Production: A Review of Literature," *National Association for Music Education,* 0(0) 1, https://doi.org/10.1177/87551233251335054.

Responsive Teaching or CRT served as a guidepost as we explored a more inclusive and culturally aware Criminal Action Exercise. Gay's Culturally Responsive Teaching seeks to value diverse student experiences by reshaping curriculum. In her 2018 publication, "Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice," she defines this work as "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them."[24] Implementing this work utilizes five core elements: 1) developing a culturally diverse knowledge base; 2) designing culturally relevant curricula; 3) demonstrating cultural care and building a community of learning; 4) developing cross-cultural forms of communication; and, 5) ensuring cultural congruity in classroom instruction.[25] Re-imagining Meisner's Criminal Action Exercise highlights pillar two of Gay's CRT designing culturally responsive curriculum, specifically societal curriculum. Though this type of curriculum aims to address bias in media portrayals of certain groups, the re-imagination of Meisner's Criminal Action Exercise takes a step further in that it fosters a sense of belonging amongst students while attempting to remove biased portrayals of certain groups from pre-existing pedagogy and curriculum.

After numerous conversations, possible re-imaginations of Meisner's exercise took on a loose shape outlined by five key qualities central to an anti-racist approach. Specifically, we followed the foundational ideas of artist and activist Nicole Brewer, who states that "anti-racist theatre is not just about racism; it's about eliminating all forms of oppression and creating authentic belonging."[26] First, this new exercise should prioritize using a peer-to-peer scenario for

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[24] Geneva Gay, *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research and Practice* (3rd. Ed.) (Teachers College Press, 2018), 36.
[25] Geneva Gay, "Preparing for Culturally Responsive Teaching" *Journal of Teacher Education*, Volume no. 53 Issue 2 (2002):106-114, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487102053002003.
[26]Nicole Brewer. "Why 'Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion' Is Obsolete" *AMERICAN THEATRE*, 2021, https://www.americantheatre.org/2019/09/16/why-equity-diversity-and -inclusion-is-obsolete/.

its initial introduction. This removes the obstacle of power imbalances and allows the actors to focus more on their tactics than creating a character different from themselves. Second, and coupled with the previous point, while the goal of this exercise is to instill a sense of stakes, environment, and use of tactics, it should never make actors enemies. Third, the re-imagined exercise should openly value its own gamification or using the mechanics of play and games in non-game scenarios. Though its aims are to teach essential tools for learning actors, these should not be at the expense of a sense of play, imagination, and exploration. Fourth, this activity should incorporate cultural consent and intimacy practices. While bringing in themes of race, gender or sexuality may not be the intent of every exercise, the various identities of each actor involved cannot be ignored or belittled. Integrating these practices adds another layer of awareness to honor the various intersectional identities of all students and to provide them with more agency. It also creates an opportunity for everyone to recognize the power dynamics still ever present even in play. Fifth, a re-imagined exercise should not work against the cultivation of the ensemble. Responsibility is thus placed on the instructor to ensure that no activity, exercise, or tool compromises the vital cultivation of the community being established within.

With the five key qualities of this re-imagined exercise clearly noted, our group pressed on to consider alternative scenarios to 'awakening their inner criminal.'[27] In workshopping these new ideas, power dynamics, race, and gender repeatedly came into play, and we often stopped to consider openly how these elements should affect the implementation of this still-evolving exercise. Throughout our conversations, we realized that one of the barriers to Meisner's exercise is that in placing so much emphasis on raising the stakes and understanding the

[27] Esper and DiMarco, p. 142.

consequences of not getting what actors need in a given scenario, the students could quickly lose sight of their partner and their own power or privilege in play. As both these outcomes work against the cultivation of an ensemble, we created a series of important steps of implementation which not only emphasize ensemble, but also help students acknowledge, verbalize, and internalize the intended outcomes of Meisner's original practice.

As we moved forward in our workshop process with new possible scenarios, we compiled a list of these important steps. First, to honor the agency of each student, both participants involved should establish their 'fences,' or physical boundaries for touch. In addition, students can use the word 'button' at any time in the exercise should they need to pause the activity.[28] Next, Actor 2, who in Meisner's original exercise was the criminal, must clearly state their objective, motivation, and expected consequences for the given scenario. Following this, both Actors 1 and 2 should communicate to each other how they are peer-to-peer. This ensures that no one takes on an unnecessary power dynamic throughout the exercise and reminds the actors that the other is *not* an enemy. However, if various levels of power, privilege, and/or oppression are purposely being incorporated into a specific scenario, it is vital that all participants openly state those facts with all involved prior to running the exercise. Next, after the space is arranged for the scene, participants should engage in some sort of 'stepping in' or 'up-roling' activity. This could be a high-five, a fist bump, a jump—something to remind Actors 1 and 2 that they are about to enter a playing space they engage with differently than they would a normal classroom or rehearsal hall, similar to fight choreography. Additionally, after the

[28] Chelsea Pace, *Staging Sex: Best Practices, Tools, and Techniques for Theatrical Intimacy*, (Routledge, 2020), 17-22.

scenario is completed, Actors 1 and 2 should repeat their chosen gesture as a way for them to 'step out' or 'de-role' to separate themselves from the work they were doing in the exercise.

Finally, to unpack the expectations and outcomes of the activity, the entire group should go through a de-loading process in which they openly discuss the benefits and difficulties of the exercise. While this process will likely differ between groups based on the ages of students, familiarity with one another, and the kind of scenarios they engaged in, there are several guiding questions which are beneficial for all participants regardless of age or experience. First, the instructor leading the exercise should ask Actors 1 and 2 if the scenario felt 'safe.' Though the concept of safety is subjective, the question is an offering for students to openly discuss their interpretation of the scenario as it unfolded. This puts the power back into the hands of the students to address moments, if any, that worked against the guiding principles expressed above which are intended to cultivate a healthy sense of ensemble. Following this, the whole group can engage in questions about what tactics were used or if observers clearly understood the intentions of Actor 2. Finally, de-loading should incorporate participants reiterating any power structures at play and clarifying to the group that while they took on a particular role for the exercise, they are part of the ensemble and a peer to the rest of the group. By concluding the exercise with de-loading, instructors and students contribute to a culture of active listening, consent and conducting rigorous inquiry into the practices of our theatre pedagogy, always striving for more inclusivity.

In workshopping various scenarios, Stover, Alvarez, and Hopson developed three possible alternatives to replace Meisner's Criminal Action Exercise. The first scenario proposes that Actors 1 and 2 are roommates, colleagues, or friends and Actor 2 has accidentally sent a text or email to Actor 1 which they did not intend. There is no need to share details of the message

openly with the group; however, the details created by Actor 2 must raise the stakes enough that if Actor 1 were to read the message or email, it would threaten to end their relationship. The objective then is for Actor 2 to find and obtain Actor 1's phone/laptop and delete the message before Actor 1 wakes up.

Another alternative scenario constructed is more fantastical in nature. Here, Actor 1 plays the role of a sleeping dog and Actor 2 is a character similar to that of Smalls from the popular film *The Sandlot* (1993). It is important to note here that while there is not an obvious power dynamic between the Dog and "Smalls" characters in this scenario, one should pay close attention to their own student groups to ensure that students of color are not automatically relegated to the role of an animal. The objective here in these alternative scenarios is to break away from harmful tropes, not to play into them. In this version of the exercise, Actor 2 must decide on an object, perhaps a baseball, that is currently in the doghouse with the sleeping dog. The objective is for Actor 2 to find and secure the chosen object to return to their friends all while not waking the sleeping dog and being caught.

A final alternative scenario developed involves Actors 1 and 2 playing the roles of a parent and child. Here it is important to reiterate that for some students, a parent/child dynamic may bring up adverse childhood memories or experiences. This is to say that no matter the scenario, as an instructor, one should always ensure that the proposed scenario works within the boundaries of all participants involved. In addition, if power structures are in play, no matter how relevant, they should always be addressed and identified. In this parent/child scenario, Actor 1 represents the sleeping child and Actor 2 takes on the role of a parent attempting to fulfill the duties of the Tooth Fairy. Here, Actor 2's objective is to replace the 'tooth' under the pillow of Actor 1 with money all while not waking them up. The consequences of failing to accomplish

this task is that the child, Actor 1, would wake up, see their parent, and realize that the Tooth Fairy is not real. Another iteration of this scenario involving more students is to imagine that several take on the role of sleeping children, and Actor 2 must place all the presents under a Christmas tree without waking them up, thus, realizing Santa Claus is not real.

These alternative scenarios, developed by our team, retain the same learning objectives presented in Meisner's Criminal Action Exercise, but without incorporating racist stereotypes, invoking past traumas, or asking anyone to 'awaken their inner criminal.' Given that no other articles or teaching materials address this exercise of Meisner's, nor offer any alternatives, Stover, Alvarez, and Hopson have begun sharing these re-imagined scenarios with other theatre students and practitioners. Mirroring how their classroom discussion sparked the flame calling for a change in Meisner's work, the re-imaginings of this exercise were first shared with other artists, educators, and practitioners at the Mid-America Theatre Conference in Atlanta, Georgia in March 2025 as part of their Practice/Production Symposium. From there, new versions of the exercise have been workshopped and explored in a studio setting with undergraduate students at Bowling Green State University and make up the findings set forth in this essay

CONCLUSION:

Following the guidance of theatrical scholars and academics who come from marginalized backgrounds, we seek to create 'culturally responsive pedagogy' believing that "if we change the training, we change the industry."[29] While Meisner's initial exercise had strong learning outcomes, activities like this still need to be reexamined for the contemporary classroom due to the ever-evolving cultural experiences of a consistently changing student population. As

[29] To explore more ideas about culturally responsive pedagogy, we encourage you to read *Latinx Actor Training* as their research has informed our understanding.

we reflect on our experience bringing these re-imagined scenarios to fruition, our takeaways include the following: 1) being open to conversation; understanding there is no prescriptive way to teach these skills; 2) inclusion goes beyond a singular practice or event; 3) blind spots can still exist in our own pedagogy on the path towards inclusive practices; and, 4) we know there is still more work to do. This entire experience began by valuing *one* marginalized voice while examining conventional pedagogical practices. By decriminalizing Meisner's Criminal Action Problem, we were able to successfully expand the scope of inclusivity in our classrooms and set an example for *all* of our students as they move forward with their artistic journeys.

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